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VENETIAN SKETCHES

BY GERTRUDE SLAUGHTER

I.—NARDO

SCRATCHED on the wall of an old prison, in Venetian dialect, is a legend to this effect:

From the man I trust, may God defend me!
From the man I trust not, I will defend myself.

This is your Venetian! Giovanni or Pietro might have said it, or almost any one of our friends among the people. As for Nardo, it is the very keynote of his character.

Nardo was the guardian and ruling spirit of the house on the Grand Canal for which we exchanged the Giudecca Palace in the early autumn. For thirty-five years he had been a servant in the house, and if at the time when we took possession he assumed a very grand air of proprietorship, it was only because after so many years of faithful service he had come to identify himself with his absent patron; and he bore his responsibilities with a sense of dignity that was entirely becoming to so scrupulous a conscience as his. In those thirty-five years Nardo had been married and lost his wife and raised up a family of useful citizens—school-teachers and dressmakers and a soldier of the army—all of them healthy and good to look upon; and Nardo's wages had never exceeded ten dollars a month. He himself had waxed strong in self-respect and independence, while he remained a simple and respectful servant. He had that about him which made it inevitable that one's relation with him should develop a common understanding and even friendship. He was not one of those dashing handsome Italians to whose charms certain foreign ladies have been over-susceptible. Giovanni, the gondolier, was one of those—a very prince among them, it would seem, to judge from his superb looks and manners and from the stories one

hears about his sojourn in England in the service of a noble lady, where he guided her gondola on the Thames and whence he returned enriched with houses and lands. Nardo was of a different species. Inclined to baldness and stoutness, he wore a ruddy complexion on his round hearty face and a reddish moustache turning to white. His manner was cordial and responsive; but compared with the suavity of Giovanni, his impetuous affability was almost brusque. He had not spared his vocal cords in the service of a deaf patron, until now the native softness of his voice was quite destroyed. He had a smile for everyone who met with his approval; and for others—among whom was De Angelis, the painter—a cold correctness of demeanor.

“I can do almost anything,” Nardo said one day in a mood of confidential frankness. “I am a cook and a gondolier and a gardener. I can do the marketing and keep the accounts and plan the menus and prepare the table and serve the meals and make the fires and clean and decorate the house. I am an expert packer and mender of glass and china. I am something of a carpenter and a mason—I built an artificial wall to hide the contents of this house from the approaching invader—and—well, I can turn my hand to almost anything. But there is one thing I cannot do. I cannot learn to speak a foreign language.”

Nardo’s efforts to say “doughnuts” and “pudding” were proof enough of this last contention. But for the rest, he was over-modest. To see him standing erect in his broad shirt-front and black suit, bending his ear to orders and assenting with quick little nods of his head, was to have revealed to the eyes the quality of an understanding mind, at once versatile and disciplined. He ought to have added among his accomplishments the ability to assist the parish priest in the functions of the church of Santa Maria Zobenigo, where he carried on his devotions with so little interference with practical affairs that for many weeks we had no knowledge of his church-going habit. He ought also to have added his quality of stewardship. The tiniest silver box might not disappear from a table loaded with silver objects without Nardo’s being aware of its absence and watchful for its return. When the treasures of the house were dragged from their hiding places behind the artificial wall, a

certain vase failed to make its appearance. And Nardo "never slept a wink for nights" until he had found it packed safely and securely inside an oven.

Above all, he should have added his uncanny faculty for being in at least two places at the same time. The ubiquity of Nardo is a mystery that has never been explained. He was always at hand at any moment to open the water-gate and help us out of launch or gondola, to answer the door-bell or telephone, to show people in or usher them away, to serve afternoon tea, to bring coffee to visitors at whatever hour. Yet he was out of the house at the same time, doing the marketing, carrying notes or messages, or crossing to the Giudecca garden—that wonderful Eden Garden of flowers and fruits which belonged to the proprietor of the house. All winter long our rooms were filled with flowers brought over at some unknown hour and arranged by Nardo's skilful hands. He brought us the papers and told us what was happening in the Piazza. He set out our candles at night, though for him there seemed to be no such thing as bedtime, for he was up until all possible hours at night and rose at the most impossible hours in the morning. There is no doubt that Nardo, with his power of management, got the best of service from the two little maids and from the two sailors in their off-duty hours. But all these other things he did himself, and one never called upon him for anything in vain. He had time for everything, and unlimited resources. One might order dinner for three, and change it at the last minute to seven. Despite the limitations of rations and food tickets, there was always enough of something. Yet there was never waste; for among all his qualities his most outstanding virtue was thrift. Hunger and poverty were among the enemies he distrusted; therefore he sought, with wise forethought, to defend himself and us against them.

The house over which Nardo held such a magical sway was like other Venice houses. It was not built around a court like the more beautiful palaces, and at some time in the growth of this crowded quarter it had been denuded of its garden. The broad hall with its black and shining pavement extends through the house from the water-entrance, where the steps drop down into

the canal, to the door that opens on the street. The steps are one or many according to the tide, and all but the highest are covered with oozy green sea-moss. The so-called street on the opposite side of the house—in reality a narrow walk along the foundations of a small canal—approaches under a low arcade formed by the heavy beams and square wooden pillars that support the overhanging floor. In the lower hall, lighted by high barred windows, the family gondolas are kept—the black carved winter cabins, the summer awnings, the cushions, the ebony chairs, and bridges for crossing dry-shod over the wet steps. Here in former days the walls were hung with gilded lanterns for the gondolas and with arms and armor—helmets and cuirasses, swords and scimitars with polished blades, and halberds with crimson velvet shafts. It was bare and empty now, except for a clump of spreading palms in the centre of the floor, placed there by Nardo as if to confront the god of war with a glimpse of festivals and gala-days.

A short stairway leads to the low-ceilinged *mezzanino* where we had our winter quarters. Above that is the *piano nobile*, of such proportions as to suggest a life of courtly ceremonies; above that the kitchen and the servants' quarters.

Our rooms, stretching along the front of the house and opening their large sun-flooded windows on the Grand Canal, were full of life and light and movement. "Allegro" was the word that sprang to one's lips at the sight of the pink walls, adorned with white scrolls of stucco on which perched painted birds of bright-colored plumage. Over the table in the dining-room Endymion lay asleep under the protecting care of the lunar goddess. In the *salottino*, at once cozy and fantastic, a gold-framed mirror and low marble console filled the space between the windows. Beside the painted mantle-shelf moulded into curves was a deep recess, perhaps once an oratory, now full of plates and bowls and candelabra of ancient porcelain. Two gold-framed mirrors mounted on swinging doors projected from opposing walls and, leaving an open space between them, cut off an ante-room over whose raised floor a dim fresco of the Entombment faded into obscurity above the sheen of mirrors and the arabesques of walls and ceiling. A soft green carpet covering the mosaic floor of the room toned with the hangings of silk damask, while a black

fur rug before the hearth served to accentuate the tiny fireplace and make it dominate the whole.

In the quiet hour before dinner one November day, soon after the armistice, the Delegate sat beside the writing table of the *salottino*, while Nardo was moving about in the next room, coming in and out with his light tripping step to arrange the lights and encourage the fire, and lingering by the door now and again as if hoping to be drawn into conversation. I was curled up in the corner of the deep divan near the centre of the room.

"Have you something to say, Nardo?" I asked at length, dropping my paper.

"At your convenience, Signora. I beg of you! At your convenience. I wanted to ask a favor. I know people are always asking favors of the Signora, and my request can wait." Motioning to him that we would avoid disturbing the Delegate, I rose and passed into the dining-room where the table was already spread with its flowing cloth and set with the Nova plates and Venetian glass and old English silver of our far-distant hostess. Nardo placed a chair for me within the narrow radius of heat about the porcelain stove in the corner near the book-shelves, and standing with his hands clasped before him, lifting and lowering them for emphasis, he told me about his mother.

For a year she had been at the mercy of the invader, up near Sacile, in the conquered Veneto. And Nardo, knowing about her and waiting and hoping, had been storing away bits of food from time to time, dividing his own rations, and buying what he could find to prepare a store of provisions against the day of deliverance; and now he asked for permission to go to her with his little horde. Terrible details had reached him as the people had come down in search of food and medicine in the days since the liberation. His mother had lived through it all and had borne it, they told him, with a stout heart. But his wisdom was justified. He had not trusted to prayers alone. And his savings would be manna from heaven.

"The people have been given starvation allowances," he told me. "One good woman, my mother's friend, appealed to an Austrian officer for a little more than the regulation allowed for her children; and the officer looked at her card and said

to her: 'You've been stealing.' 'Stealing!' she exclaimed. 'Then why should I come to you? I have had nothing but what my card allows. And my children—' 'I know you've been stealing,' he replied, 'because you would be dead, otherwise. Nobody could live on what your card allows. You've been stealing, and now you're lying. Go!'

"Oh!" murmured Nardo, "God will punish the offenders. But the poor victims! What will make it up to them? Oh, there must never, never be another war! And all this time, while the people were living on bits of meal, their stores were seized, their cows and oxen and horses were stolen, and whatever the army of occupation could not consume was transported into Germany and Austria. Their farming implements are gone. How can they begin life again with nothing? Ah! It takes the heart out of one."

It was easy to grant his request and to promise him a new gown for his mother and some flour and lard from the Red Cross stores. Then I went on through the house to my own corner room and turned on the light.

The shutters were closed, a copper pitcher of hot water stood on the washstand, lace-edged towels of soft white linen hung on the wooden rack, the books and paper on my table had been put in order; it was all clean and comely. Yet as I looked about, a sense of oppression came over me. What right had anyone to comforts and luxuries like these? In the war-zone they seemed incongruous. Here was this room; the white cross-beams of the ceiling glistened in the light; a gold and white bed, large and low and covered with Sardinian filet, stood upon the soft red carpet. A dark wardrobe, deeply carved, rose up against the wall beside the window which I should open later to look down past the Church of the Salute to the waters that open out into the Great Basin. In front of this window a white and gold dressing-table of curious design spread out its top behind the mirror like a great open sea-shell. Hand-carved and inlaid cabinets lined the opposite wall, interspersed with books and pictures. The marble mantle rested on corbels sculptured into the forms of smiling children.

I sat down beside them on a straight white chair and shivered,

thinking of Nardo's stories. And my mind wandered back to the days of the June offensive, when I had shared greater dangers and been closer to the suffering and the hardship. Again I was up there on the straight, hot road that led to the fighting line. I was dashing along in a camion among the shell holes and the heaps of clothing, where the battle had just been raging, meeting the death squads with their pickaxes and seeing them at their work, and passing the long line of ambulances that brought the wounded back. Again I stood in the cream-colored villa, shaded by eucalyptus trees, where the camions were driving in through the avenue under cool foliage and stopping by the garden entrance to deposit their loads of human wreckage. The pavement of the broad hall that ran through the villa was crowded with stretchers. There was scarcely room enough to pass between them in order to carry the hot milk for which the men were famishing. From the walls, covered to the ceiling with replicas of Greek and Roman sculpture, the helpless gods looked down on us while we worked, and the odor of antiseptics hung heavy among the frescoes and carved-wood mouldings.

They were brought in by the hundreds every day—silent, tired, exhausted men. I had never known before what exhaustion meant. We were too far behind the lines to see the battle vim—the arditi advancing with bombs in both hands and a knife between their teeth. But we saw something of the racial gentleness toward suffering, which is like their sympathy for children. “Shall I give your coffee to these German prisoners?” asked a young Italian doctor. “Ah, yes!” he answered his own question; “they are wounded, and a wounded man is never an enemy.”

Ah! Here in this house I was too protected and too far away. Yet, no! For in this very house the wife and children of Nazario Sauro, the martyred hero, had waited while he performed his forty exploits on the sea and under the sea, and it had not protected them from the blow that fell. Here they had bidden him their last farewell; here the news had reached them of his capture and execution, and that last letter in which he said: “Teach my sons that I was first of all an Italian, and after that a father, a husband, and a citizen.” I was to see later the monument raised to him at Pola by Admiral Cagni—a simple column from the

Roman ruins crossed by another shaft of ancient marble, standing on the grass in the shadow of the frowning, massive Austrian prison where he was tried and condemned. And I was to learn later the story of his mother's heroism; of how, when summoned from their home in Capo d'Istria in order to wrest from her the proof of his identity which he had not betrayed, she steadfastly refused to give a sign of recognition, declaring that she had never seen the man. And when a serving woman, thinking to trip her, had whispered privately, "They will put that man to death at sunrise," "God rest his soul, whoever he may be," she answered without flinching. "To me he is a stranger."

No, this house had not saved Sauro's wife and children, but, none the less, they had been protected here from the actual ravages of war. How different would have been their tragedy if the invader had entered their home and driven them out, or robbed them, if nothing worse, of all those objects of tender association that make up the visible ties of a common life! Sister Annetta's family, for example. The father was dead, and the mother and four children—his memory might have blessed them in their little farmhouse. But they were uprooted and cast out upon the winds. The clothing we had sent them yesterday would cover their bodies for a time. And what then?

Dinner was ready to be served. I plunged my hands and face into the hot water and went back into the dining-room. Margherita, whose rooms were on the floor above, took her place between us. She brought the Delegate a telegram that had come by airship from Trieste, and we discussed plans for sending them hospital supplies on the morning boat. We talked of many half-finished projects, and we laughed and told anecdotes; and if Nardo could not speak a foreign language, the frequent smile on his face showed that he could understand one dangerously well! And after dinner the Delegate walked to the warehouse, where he and his lieutenant worked to a late hour loading the supplies onto a boat that was to start for Trieste at daybreak, while Nardo prepared a package of food for the Delegate, who was to go with them, and Margherita stood over the telephone arranging for his passage on a torpedo boat.

It was Nardo who called him before daylight, and gave him

his breakfast of coffee and toast, and saw to it that he had all he needed for the cold voyage. And when the little launch had dashed away from the doorstep across the dark water, Nardo slipped away to early Mass and returned in time for his regular duties.

A few hours later he showed me a letter from his daughters who were begging to be allowed to return to Venice. If they could find employment, it would be permitted by the authorities. What did I think?

"Tell them to remain in Rome, Nardo, till things are readjusted here," and I gave him my reasons.

"The Signora is right," he answered. "I will tell them that we must not think of what we want. Our desires must not count. We must think of what is best for Venice."

That afternoon he set out on his journey to his mother.

GERTRUDE SLAUGHTER..